

# Sogo Bò

## The Animals Come Forth

Sogo Bò is a puppet masquerade performed by members of youth societies in the Segou region of Mali by the Boso, Somono, Markla (Marka; French: Markala), and Bamana peoples. The masquerade occurs at the change of the rainy and dry seasons in the months of May or June or September or October. Performances occur both during the day and at night. The Sogo Bò dates from the pre-Colonial era and evolved from grass puppets to the elaborate wooden and cloth figures of today.

Sogo Bò masquerades include traditional songs and performances that pertain to hunting and fishing, placating spirits, such as water and bush genies, and giving thanks to the spirits after an animal, such as an antelope, has been killed. The performances also use satire to address issues within the cultures, such as the relationships between young men and their elders and between men and women. These performances can be used to portray as well as to challenge the traditional political and social hierarchies, and can present commentaries on society.

Sogo Bò, which means “the animals come forth,” was traditionally performed in individual villages. These performances have gained recognition as an important part of the cultural heritage of Mali and Sogo Bò troupes increasingly perform at regional, national, and international festivals. Sogo Bò theater is not immune to modernization. Larger festivals, like the *Festival de Masques et Marionnettes de Markala* and the *Festival sur le Niger*, organized by governmental or commercial interests to promote tourism and the cultural heritage of Mali, also

include Sogo Bò performances. Many communities will also perform with masks and puppets for visiting tourists. However, most people in the Malian communities that practice Sogo Bò consider only the local performances to be the “real” Sogo Bò.

In addition to human forms, animals like crocodiles, antelopes, and lions all make an appearance in the traditional puppet performances. Yet some of these animals used no longer inhabit the Segou region in Mali; therefore, they are not directly familiar to contemporary peoples in the area. Instead of carving animals from direct experience, the youth organizations must create the puppets using pictures in books, magazines or on the Internet.

The earliest puppets were made of grass, and are the most abstract and the least naturalistic in form. While most puppets used in the Sogo Bò today are carved from wood and painted, recently many communities began utilizing cloth to create the puppets. Many of the Malian artists who now make these puppets have traveled and attended art schools, and new forms of artistic expression are entering the repertoire. Sogo Bò has always been a dynamic rather than traditional event and integration of new influences continues this historic tendency.

Boso fishing villages are the acknowledged birthplace of Sogo Bò. According to tradition, Sogo Bò began when the *wòkulòw* (bush spirits) took a Boso hunter named Toboji Centa, into the woods and taught him the masquerade. Sogo Bò performances began among the fishing villages on the Niger and Bani Rivers and spread east and west to nearby farming villages. Farmers in the Segou region had adopted Sogo Bò by the 1850s. The Bamana, the farming group that created most of the pieces in this exhibit, are thought to have adopted Sogo Bò

in the late nineteenth century.

The characters in Sogo Bò can be interpreted in different ways. For example, the hyena represents knowledge and wisdom, but also self-complacency and naïveté. The viewer’s age, gender, or position in society all influence individual interpretations. The way in which the young men portray the character, the songs used to accompany the performance, the elders’ reaction to the performance, the tempo and rhythm of the drumming, the masks’ and puppets’ forms, and the general reaction of the audience all impact a character’s meaning. Masks can differ in their decoration (colors, patterns), but their overall form (shape, size, number and curve of horns, etc.) must remain the same so that the audience is able to recognize them.

Even though interpretation differs on an individual basis, a few generalizations exist that nearly everyone in a community agrees on. An example of the subjective nature of character interpretation is the Beautiful Woman. During her performance, the young men in the village convulse as though overcome with lust and desire. The elders revere the moral character of the Beautiful Woman (*Yayoroba*) and rebuke the young men for paying attention only to her looks. The Antelope (*Sogo*) may indicate rivalry and competition; The Favorite Wife (*Barabara*) is viewed differently by men and women: to men, she fosters unity in the home; to women, she causes conflict; the Lion (*Wara; Waraba*) represents authority and majesty, but also represents the master hunter who kills the lion.

Remember, interpretation of the masks and puppets depends in part on the viewer. What forms do you see? What do these forms mean to you?

The Sogo Bò performances are defined by the community as entertainment and play, but also hold deeper social meanings. Among the Bamana, the process of becoming a competent performer begins when infants are introduced to musical rhythms of performances during the first years of their lives. Through these performances, young boys and girls acquire practical knowledge about being Bamana and learn about Bamana beliefs and values. Both a man's and a woman's individual performance is read as an expression of his or her character and an indicator of his or her future potential. Masquerades and puppetry allow participants to engage in creative dialogue about social relationships and cultural values that shape everyday life. Men and women dancers are associated with different rhythms. Timing of performances is during transitional periods between the dry and rainy seasons. Most communities perform at the beginning of the dry season, a period that marks the start of the harvest, peak fishing months, and the beginning of hunting season. Social activities begin several hours before the performances, which are organized in series with musical interludes between each set.

Although both boys and girls can be part of the *kamalen ton* or *youth society*, only the young men are responsible for crafting and performing the masks and puppets. They harvest the grass and other materials needed to make the support structure for the masks (including begging women for pieces of cloth)<sup>1</sup> a few days before the performance. Older masks are brought out of storage and repainted. The costumes are constructed the day before the performance. This is done in secret, to ensure that no one sees them before the performance.

<sup>1</sup> Mary Jo Arnoldi, "Playing the Puppets: Innovation and Rivalry in Bamana Youth Theater of Mali" *TDR* 32 (1988), 67.

The *kamalen ton* compound is declared off limits to all but the men of the society during work. Senior members work on the more complicated constructions, while younger members sew costumes and prepare simple masks. Wooden puppets can be created by the youths or they can be commissioned from a professional carver (blacksmith).

Because the men create the objects, they become the owners or guardians of the masks, but the Sogo Bò performance belongs to all members of the group – both boys and girls. The term ownership does not imply that each man has a specific claim to an object; rather it refers to rights and duties conferred upon the members of the association. The masks and puppets may be guarded by the youth association, but in reality they belong to the whole of the Bamana culture. Young boys enter the *kamalen ton* at the age of 14 and leave the group around the age of 34. The young girls join the association at the age of 14 and leave when they are married. Since these objects are part of a dynamic cultural process (rather than a ritual) they can be replaced or sold to collectors to raise money for the creation of new masks.



## Sogo Bò The Animals Come Forth

Features masks and rod puppets from the Segou region of Mali in the collection of Mary Sue and Paul Peter Rosen of New York city.

This exhibition contains a selection of 18 objects from a larger exhibit of the same title that was previously on display at The African Art Museum of the S.M.A. Fathers in Tenafly, New Jersey. That exhibition was curated by Dr. Mary Jo Arnoldi, Curator, African Ethnology, Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

The University of Memphis' exhibition was organized and installed by undergraduate and graduate students as part of the class "Museum Exhibitions" (ARTH/ANTH 4662/6662) in Spring semester 2010. Information about Sogo Bò and the individual pieces was derived from the exhibit catalog, *Sogo Bò: The Animals Come Forth*, by Dr. Arnoldi, from her book *Playing with Time. Art and Performance in Central Mali* (Indiana 1995) and her article "Playing the Puppets: Innovation and Rivalry in Bamana Youth Theater of Mali" (1988).

The exhibition, *Sogo Bò: The Animals Come Forth*, highlights puppets and masks primarily made by the Bamana of west central Mali, although other nearby groups also practice *Sogo Bò*. Organized and presented by members of youth associations (*kamalen ton*), the *Sogo Bò* reinforces as well as questions - in performance and music – accepted cultural norms, institutions and practices.